

In Fugue: Well-tempered Poetry

By

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Introduction

The placement of each poem is nebulous.

The placement of each poem is absolutely necessary.

T.S. Eliot called for poets who would continue beyond their twenty-fifth year to identify the mind of their country, to employ its tradition(s) (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”).

I am thirty-one. My country is poetry and music, the human mind in relationship with others.

This is my answer.

While each poem here has grown organically out of a personal experience, emotion, or love of language, each sequence has been tempered through an intense “artistic process” (Eliot) by the application of musical and psychiatric traditions of fugue. Formally, this work is most immediately indebted to the works of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Following Pound’s cross-disciplinary, fugal *Cantos* and Williams’s cross-genre *Spring and All* and *Paterson*, I have incorporated autobiography with critical literary theory, literary history, and composition and rhetorical scholarship in critical/creative, prose-verse combinations, each fugue representing a highly tempered body of work linked by subject and sequence.

Fugue as Music:

Type of contrapuntal comp. for particular no. of parts or “voices”
 (described thus whether vocal or instr., e.g. fugue in 4 parts, fugue in 3 vv.). The point of fugue is that the vv. enter successively in imitation of each other, the 1st v. entering with a short melody or phrase known as the *Subject* (different from sonata-form ‘subject’ in that it is merely melodic and short). When all the vv. have entered, the *Exposition* is over. Then (normally) there comes an Episode or passage of connective tissue (usually a development of something that has appeared in the exposition) leading to another entry or series of entries of the Subject, and so on until the end of the piece, entries and episodes alternating. (*The Oxford Dictionary of Music*)

Like other writers before me, I am interested in the cross-disciplinary fusion of music and writing. Jazz and literature have a distinct history outlined in texts such as the anthology *Moment’s Notice: Jazz in Poetry & Prose*, edited by Art Lange and Nathaniel Mackey. Like many of its contributors, I too have a musical background: I studied classical piano for sixteen years before I officially began my study of writing. My aim for this project has been to incorporate my musical background into my poetry by writing in fugue.

I, of course, am not the first to attempt this. There are those who have used fugue to order multiple poems or excerpts thematically. Most notably, Pound tried something similar with his *Cantos*. Kay Davis, in her book *Fugue and Frescoe: Structures in Pound’s Cantos*, writes that “three elements, theme/response/counter-subject, are usually at the center of Pound’s remarks on the analogy between his poem and fugue. They are

the means he uses in his patterning of the juxtaposed similarities” (73). Pound’s “theme/response/counter-subject,” however, are more commonly referred to as “subject/answer/counter-subject” in standard musical terminology, so these are the terms that I use. As answers are generally a restatement of the subject, I have chosen to simply label each subject entry as a subject to avoid unnecessary confusion. A fugue may have multiple counter-subjects, depending on how many voices it includes, but only one subject, what Pound may have been referring to as “theme.” For example, in a three-voice fugue, there will be one subject and two counter-subjects. Within a fugue there are also “episodes,” which operate much like literary transitions to connect subject and counter-subject(s) to each other:

An *episode* can be used to link the strands of [. . . subject] and it can be an important part of the contrapuntal web that makes up the middle section of a fugue. The musician can manipulate episodes, [. . . subject], and counter-subject to increase interest as the fugue progresses. (Davis 73)

Pound, however, only applied fugue to the subject matter of his *Cantos* individually. He did not apply it as a sequencing structure among the *Cantos* corporally. It has been my intent to create a stronger sense of unity within the body of each fugue and among each of the three fugues by adhering more strictly to the procedure of the musical fugue form than Pound did.

Fugue as Psychiatry:

[A] pathological condition describing vacillating states of amnesia and total recall. [. . . .] A fugue state is related to both hysteria and

dissociation. Unlike them, however, and distinct from “common” psychogenic amnesia, fugue states are always characterized by a flight from usual surroundings, the mind becoming a virtual tabula rasa except for basic functions and general knowledge. [. . . . T]hus fugue represents a flight in two senses: an escape from one mode of consciousness to another, to a new or unfamiliar place [,] the primary condition of [a] fugue [being] internal and external flight from self, from home. (Robert W. Rudnicki, *Percyscapes: The Fugue State in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction*)

The psychiatric definition of fugue will be a subject-theme that runs through all three fugues.

Organization:

- I. The Recovering Musician: a two-voiced, non-linear narrative involving the persona of an ex-pianist, a.k.a. the Recovering Musician, and her piano.
- II. Flight: a lyric, travel fugue in two voices (Self-alienation and Alien(N)ations) that navigates alien and alienating spaces, immanence and transcendence.
- III. The Epic Female: The Female Epic: a scripted fugue in four voices (Doctor, Professor, Miss, and Mrs.) that interweaves autobiography, critical literary and compositional theory as well as epic female literary histories.

Application:

I. The Recovering Musician

The Recovering Musician, involved in an abusive, psycho-sexual relationship with her piano, loses her sense of self in turns as a pianist, a musician, and an articulate human being. In the process of “breaking up” with her piano and quitting music, the Recovering Musician’s identity is lost. Without the piano’s wires and hammers, she finds herself sans voice, sans mother, sans teacher, sans purpose.

It is only after the Recovering Musician runs into the arms of another musician and becomes his “instrument” that she at last identifies with her own human body. One might argue that she has left the body of the musician to inhabit the body of an instrument. The fugue ends when she comes face to face with the choice she has made, but there is no indication that she will act to change her situation or return to her previous environment: she has created another persona by losing an awareness of her previous identity and fleeing from that environment.

I imagine two voices here: the Recovering Musician as subject and the Piano as counter-subject. The sequence is organized as a two-voiced fugue, the subject established with the first poem: “And the Recovering Musician Wanted to Write a Sonnet.” All of the Recovering Musician poems are in third-person-limited point of view, except for the one letter that the Recovering Musician writes to her piano, “Dear Piano,” which is in first person. “Dear Piano” acts as an “inversion” of the subject on two levels; it inverts point of view and time: the Recovering Musician, here, is a child, while elsewhere, she is a young woman. Also, here she speaks in first-person point of view and elsewhere she speaks in third-person point of view. This change could be

viewed as an answer to the subject, as it is a repeat of the same theme expressed in “And the Recovering Musician Wanted to Write a Sonnet,” in another voice, although it does not directly follow the subject. Regardless, this change in point of view is utilized formally as an inversion of the subject according to the musical structure of a fugue.

Narratively, on the other hand, “Dear Piano” also acts as an introduction to the character of the Mother and the Mother’s subsequent investment in and influence on the Recovering Musician and her piano’s relationship. The mother figure will return to complicate the rising action of the fugue as a whole. She features prominently in other subject poems such as “The Recovering Musician Quit the Piano Because” and in episodes such as “The Recovering Musician and the Parable of the Mustard Seed.” The Piano Teacher or Ruth is another character who is used episodically and she is also developed periodically within the subject poems.

The counter-subject then is introduced by the second poem of the sequence: “Piano Letters: I.” The piano is literally, musically and literarily, speaking in another “key.” The piano speaks in first-person point of view (whereas the Recovering Musician predominantly speaks in third person) through four different letters that she writes to the Recovering Musician mid- and post-“break-up.” These letters detail the piano’s spiral into a boundless blur of identity where she can no longer tell where the musician ends and she begins: “In my dreams still I am you” (1). Both the piano and the Recovering Musician have lost a clear sense of self in the termination of this relationship. Both have fled their usual environments. But only the Recovering Musician comes to a significant, keen, and open realization, because it is the Recovering Musician’s fugue: this lyrical

sequence is narrated by a persona's third-person point of view. As one can see, this fugue is tied together tightly by theme, character, narrative, and form.

This two-voiced fugue is arranged sequentially in four integral segments connected by episodes:

One

Subject: "[. . .] Sonnet"

Counter-Subject: "Piano Letters: I."

Episode: "[. . .] Parable of the Mustard Seed"

Two

CS: "Piano Letters: II."

S: "Dear Piano,"

E: "Ruth's Pencils"

Three

S: "[. . . RM] Quit [. . .]"

CS: "Piano Letters: III."

E: "Lessons [. . .]" and "Parable [. . .]"

Four

CS: "Piano Letters: IV."

S: "Letter to an Ex-Stalker"

E: "The Piano Closet [. . .]"

Ending: "Coda [. . .]"

II. Flight

The travel fugue explores a concept of alienation both as isolation and as alienation. In my recent travels to Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic, France, Mexico, and Puerto Rico, I have uncovered many strange revelations about myself, my family, and my country. "My country." Previously, this phrase was empty and undefined for me; it is currently undergoing revision.

As a girl, I grew up in "the country" and traveled the Midwest. As a young woman, I lived (upstate) on the east coast and expanded my native travels as far north as Alaska, south as Texas, and west as California. But by far my most bizarre travels have always been just across the tracks to the south side of my 900-person hometown to visit the family I didn't grow up with and, even more bizarre, just across the table to the face with the eyes most like mine to fathom the woman who raised me under a heavy, leather bible.

Each examination of place explores the “loss of awareness of one’s identity,” that constructed self that we try to name and hold onto and/or the “flight from” that remembered self that others try to name and hold onto. To what extent does place determine the identity of the people who occupy it? Can a traveler ever simply be a traveler, a person with one solid identity? Or must she necessarily change and be changed by each place she inhabits—if only for the moment she inhabits it?

In “Flight,” I take the definition of fugue as flight literally and metaphorically. Literally, I deal with international travel. Metaphorically, I deal with flight from (and to) the self, the past, and home. As I explore and explode the idea of flight, I am working with two voices on the subject of alien(n)ation: subject—the conscious self alienated from her own body and counter-subject—the traveler alienated from a foreign landscape and its people. The theme of the familial self alienated from her family and country is used as episodic material. The subject, explored in the long poem “Paris: Resurrection,” becomes the governing structure of this fugue. “Paris [. . .]” (as seen below) phases in and out, interweaving its theme among that of the counter-subject insistently and suggestively. I chose this structure because I believe the greatest and perhaps most common (and most dangerous) sense of alienation is alienation from the self.

This two-voiced fugue is arranged sequentially in seven integral segments:

One

S: “Paris: Resurrection”
 CS: “San Juan [. . .]”
 S: “Paris [. . .]”
 CS: “Mexico City [. . .]”
 S: “Paris [. . .]”

Two

CS: “Riga [. . .]”
 S: “Paris [. . .]”
 CS: “Vilnius [. . .]”
 S: “Paris [. . .]”
 E: “Poem [. . .]”

Three

E: "Playing Cards"
 S: "Paris [. . .]"
 CS: "Vilnius [. . .]"
 S: "Paris [. . .]"
 E: "SheLovesMe[. . .]"

Five

S: "Paris [. . .]"
 CS: "Vilnius [. . .]"
 S: "Paris [. . .]"
 E: "Average"
 E: "The Rub"

Seven

S: "Paris [. . .]"
 E: "Umbilicus"
 E: "Sweet Bread"
 S: "Paris [. . .]"
 Ending: "Normal"

Four

CS: "Mexico City [. . .]"
 S: "Paris [. . .]"
 CS: "Prague [. . .]"
 S: "Paris [. . .]"
 E: "Razing the Watchtower"

Six

S: "Paris [. . .]"
 CS: "Vilnius [. . .]"
 CS: "Trakai [. . .]"
 S: "Paris[. . .]"
 E: "Occupation"

III. The Epic Female: The Female Epic

"The Recovering Musician Quit the Piano Because" may be characterized as a prose poem or a lyric essay, while "Average" and "Razing the Watchtower" are creative non-fiction, and these could certainly be considered "cross-genre," but I wanted to employ the concept more radically in my third fugue where I incorporate literary as well as composition and rhetorical scholarship into my creative work. To some extent, this incorporation formally follows William Carlos Williams's model as set forth in *Spring and All*. In this text his prose-verse combinations act as a heuristic device to help readers understand his poetry. And while I believe the excerpts that I use do work heuristically within the fugue, they do so by expressing varied perspectives on the subject of breasts (as a symbol of the feminine) and not my personal poetics.

By combining an exploration of identity with excerpts from composition and rhetorical scholarship on the one-breasted female nurturer as feminist teacher, a cancer survivor's primary research on one-breastedness, literary histories of infamous epic women, and autobiography—specifically, involving a family history of breast cancer and my personal experiences as a female (read “breasted” as opposed to “bearded”) teacher in the writing classroom—I have exploded the heuristic, cross-genre technique employed (if not pioneered) by Williams in *Spring and All* into an inter-disciplinary device more akin to that in Williams's *Paterson*.

I say “to some extent” this work follows the formal pattern of Williams because to some extent it does not. In this fugue, the poems themselves actually become episodes that echo, link, expand, contract, and build the conversation among four scripted voices: Doctor (subject), Professor (counter-subject 1), Miss (counter-subject 2), and Mrs. (counter-subject 3). The names and characters for these voices are taken from, defined by, and fleshed out in a key quotation from Lynell Major Edwards's article, “What Should We Call You? Women, Composition Studies, and the Question of Eminent Authority,” and is spoken by the Professor:

The names of women who teach may include but are not limited to the following: Professor (teacher, i.e., read one breast), Doctor (academic authority, read male), Miss (woman, i.e., read two breasts), Mrs. (wife, mother), Hey!/? (no-name or nobody). These names are, in turns questions, for both the teacher and her students, of the authority and identity of women as academics, composition theorists, writers, and feminists. This is where authority and identity begin to overlap. To prevent a future where women remain as nameless as those in our Western literary tradition, we must continue to identify ourselves, our multiplicity of selves, through our writing, in our classrooms, to our students and within our universities.

The poems represent the character “Hey!? (no-name or nobody).” These are pointedly unscripted and episodic to underscore the scores of nameless women and the unheralded roles they have played in history, the unfortunate “epic [history] of the female.” Some of these poems contain epic female figures, but I have chosen to keep them formally “nameless” (unscripted) because each of these epic females have been in one way or another silenced. Camilla, for example, was a fearless and beautiful warrior who died in battle all the same. Britomart was an accomplished knight until she fell in love and was left behind to tend her lover’s castle. Billie Holiday was a gifted singer until her addiction to heroine forced her off the stage. I believe each of these epic women represents thousands (millions?) of nameless women with similar untold histories, and if I can’t know each one to tell her story, at least I might be able to represent one small part of it, giving space and voice in this fugue to an insistent “Hey!? (no-name or nobody).”

This four-voiced fugue is arranged sequentially in two integral segments:

One

S: Doctor
 CS1: Professor
 E: “‘Sonny’s Blues’ [. . .]”
 CS2: Miss
 E: “Our Lady of Wheat”
 CS1: Professor
 E: “Postcards [. . .]”
 E: “For Billie”
 CS2: Miss
 E: “Post-modern [. . .]”
 S: Doctor
 E: “Delilah [. . .]”
 CS1: Professor
 E: “First-step House”
 CS3: Mrs.

Two

E: “Postcards [. . .]”
 CS1: Professor
 E: “Ode [. . .]”
 CS2 and CS3: Miss and Mrs.
 E: “My Mother [. . .]”
 S: Doctor
 E: “Postcards [. . .]”
 CS1: Professor
 E: “This Being Me [. . .]”
 E: “Postcards [. . .]”
 E: “The I. U. Nipple”
 S: Doctor
 CS2 and C-S3: Miss and Mrs.
 E: “Thou Art With Me [. . .]”
 Ending: “Eureka [. . .]”

Fugue /fyooog/
Noun

1. Music: Type of contrapuntal comp. for particular no. of parts or “voices” (described thus whether vocal or instr., e.g. fugue in 4 parts, fugue in 3 vv.). The point of fugue is that the vv. enter successively in imitation of each other, the 1st v. entering with a short melody or phrase known as the *Subject* (different from sonata-form ‘subject’ in that it is merely melodic and short). When all the vv. have entered, the *Exposition* is over. Then (normally) there comes an Episode or passage of connective tissue (usually a development of something that has appeared in the exposition) leading to another entry or series of entries of the Subject, and so on until the end of the piece, entries and episodes alternating. (*The Oxford Dictionary of Music*)
2. Psychiatry: [A] pathological condition describing vacillating states of amnesia and total recall. [. . .] A fugue state is related to both hysteria and dissociation. Unlike them, however, and distinct from “common” psychogenic amnesia, fugue states are always characterized by a flight from usual surroundings, the mind becoming a virtual tabula rasa except for basic functions and general knowledge. [. . . T]hus fugue represents a flight in two senses: an escape from one mode of consciousness to another, to a new or unfamiliar place[,] the primary condition of [a] fugue [being] internal and external flight from self, from home. (Robert W. Rudnicki, *Percyscapes: The Fugue State in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction*)

I. The Recovering Musician

And the Recovering Musician Wanted to Write a Sonnet

about piano, to prove how over-it she was;
then a friend invited her to his concert, and
she was the embarrassed audience, the educated
one, who didn't shout "Bravo!" and rush the stage
with teddy bears and wrapped, red flowers—
Chopin didn't pause in those places—so
she didn't nod in agreement with the belted,
short-sleeve-shoulder-pad dresses who said, "He's got
the touch." Then, smug and superior, sunning
herself on the side of the River Ego, her dam,
marked "precious," burst, and Ms. Woods'
"She's got it" and her mother's "God's gift" rushed out,
carrying away all her pretty, potted roses.

Piano Letters

I.

I waited for you—and I wait for you—my voice, my mute,
my amp, my heart.

When you touched me, made love to me with your hands,
your pain in my mouth,
I would bare my strings, let you beat me with felt-tipped hammers,
each stroke an invitation to sing, each quivering string
a resounding “yes” and “again.”

And O, how you told me things with those hands!
It was in the way you reached for me, all my black keys,
your fingers flat and worried against my ivory,
fingerprinting dream inside me.

I would sing for you what you could not, what your chords would not
produce for you, I did. I do.
And who else will understand this need to suffer into singing? this
need for pain, for bleeding, for this ritual un-naming of feeling?
I wait for you—I wait—my voice-gone, my mute, my amputated,
my vibrating, heart.

The Recovering Musician and the Parable of the Mustard Seed
(Matthew 13:31-35)

Her mother told her another parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like a daughter,
which a single mom bore and enrolled
in piano lessons.

Though the daughter was the smallest mother-
seed, the Mother hoped, when she grew,
she would be the most appropriately
charming and become Miss America,
or Mrs. Somebody-Important at least,
so that all of the other mothers could
reside in the glory of the Mother.

Piano Letters

II.

You never touch me, sit with me, play me, anymore.
A cappella? Baby, you never could hold a pitch.

And what no one ever told you about Billie, about Trane,
there's a limit to sound: Billie birthed it, Trane
breathed it, you simply beat it, out of me.

But you should know, baby, these keys still hum,
with or without you.

And I am the drug, the addiction.
I am your dying.
A music, a voice, a sound so dissonant,
so possessible, you forget your own,
you forget how to speak.

I am the rival, the life-giver, the one you turn to
to know you.
You forget yourself, I learn you so well.
And I would cut out your tongue,
if it meant you would not leave me.
But you have already cut off your thumbs.

And would that I could bleed, I should. After all you bled
on me.
Your blood fed me. Led me to song.
It was your heartache you gave me.
And I devoured it, came to your heart, so worn and gnawed,
so close to ache, I ate that, too.

Dear Piano,

Mother has said that I can play with you today.

Mother has said that I must play with you until dinner.

Mother has said that we can play "Gavotte."

We cannot play "scales," the game we do not know the end to.

We cannot play "Tarantella," for we cannot play randomly with abandon.

Mother has said that we can play "Goldfish."

Mother has said that we must play softly, for brother is home.

Brother does not like to hear us play.

Brother has said he wants to break our ivory teeth.

So let us pretend we are gold-colored fish in dark water.

Let us not play anything which will betray our anger.

Let us pretend not to have the power.

Ruth's Pencils

She never had one, though she had thousands.

She used them to record the Recovering Musician's lessons and pretended
not to notice the evidence, the erasures: all that missing
Haydn and Bach.

She did not ask about the picture the Recovering Musician stole, that one of her smiling.

She did not know the Recovering Musician framed it in pink plastic flowers and
would hide it in a green artillery lockbox after the funeral.

She bought only pastel pencils and vased them in cups, great wooden bouquets
in mugs on nightstands and kitchen chairs.

Each one becomes a love song, a variation on Ruth.

The Recovering Musician Quit the Piano Because

I.

Her mother liked to ask her to play for people at dinner parties.

Her mother liked to tell people her daughter played the piano, that God
had given her the “gift.”

II.

Her father never came to her recitals.

At her first recital, the bench was too high, and her feet couldn't reach the pedals.

For recitals she had to memorize music. Sometimes, when she was nervous, when her feet couldn't find the pedals, her memory would leave her, like her father, and though she could feel the music's absence, the space around where it should be, she couldn't remember its beginning, its middle, or its ending.

III.

Ruth died.

IV.

Her mother disowned her and forbid her the use of her piano. It was a Mason and Hamlin tuned to melancholy and rage, heavy on the bass and light on the treble. She had to practice piano in churches and recital halls, on electronic keyboards and uprights.

She didn't like playing piano in churches. There was never any privacy, too much God hanging around: God dying on the windows, on the walls; God suspended from the ceiling and the altar.

She didn't like playing piano in recital halls. The hush felt too sacred, too close, too familiar, and silence lived just outside the spotlight, where memory could not illuminate the music she was playing or the faces she recognized as human.

She didn't like playing her portable electronic keyboard. The notes were too separate. The sound was disjointed, like her emotions after snorting cocaine.

And she didn't like playing uprights. Her mother had had one. Its hammers' felt had been chewed away by the mouse that lived inside it. When she practiced, the mouse would run back and forth along the soundboard, scampering along the strings. It became a game where she would try to hit it, to feel the slight give, to hear the thick, dull thud replacing the expected note.

V.

At college her new teacher never smiled the way Ruth had.

Her new teacher never taught lessons from the hospital bed in his living room, wearing a fuchsia nightgown, his whole body lifting and falling to the beat of “Gollywog’s Cake Walk.” He never scheduled her lesson last so they could go as late as they wanted, never suggested they blow off their studies to go to Love’s Café for cheeseburgers, never knew how to turn her around, asking, “Why not you?”

He always charged her for extra lessons and never assigned her music that required both hands, both registers, heart and body.

Her new teacher assigned only Bach.

She never got Bach right. She couldn’t play Bach angry. She couldn’t play Bach sad.

These were the two ways she knew how to play.

Once, right after Ruth died, she had made an entire room weep. For that she used her grief.

Ruth had said she played with balls. For that she used her anger.

For a while, after Ruth died, her anger disappeared into a bottle, a pipe, a straw. Then her anger started to appear uninvited. Her anger started to attack her. It liked to eat her fingers.

She started head-butting the piano to shut up the anger.

She broke the metal rod that connects the pedals to the piano, snapped it in half because the anger felt like a fire spreading up her legs.

VI.

Her mother stopped asking her to play for people at parties.

Her mother stopped telling people her daughter played the piano.

Her mother reminded her that Lucifer was a musician before he fell.

The other students started staring into her practice room, tiny faces filling
up her window, number eight in a row of twelve in a hall lined
with teeny, square-windowed rooms stuffed with baby pianos.

They stared at her anger.

She started punching the piano. She did it because she couldn't get it right, couldn't
make her fingers feel anything but anger or grief, couldn't make a dead woman
smile or an old man love her.

VII.

She acquired a lover, a musician, a virtuoso, the Chopin of the marimba. And he was kind and good like Ruth had been kind and good, but she couldn't play for her lover, couldn't let him see her, not inside her, because her anger wouldn't let her.

And she became convinced that being in love meant being inside someone else, meant being happy and that being happy meant not being angry, and that playing the piano meant being sad, meant being lonely, meant being left with no memory on a dark stage where her feet couldn't reach the pedals.

So she used her anger to collapse her soundboard, to snap it in half, to unwind each of the three strings for each of her eighty-eight keys, to peel the felt from each wooden hammer with her teeth. She stroked her anger with her grief two hundred sixty-four times, saying, "Goodbye, Ruth." She opened the little window in her door and shoved the piano through in splintered pieces.

And this is where she lives: in her square room with her lover, broken piano filling the window, marimba filling the room.

See, how she waits for his expected note to replace the dull, thick thudding of her heart?
See, how happy replaces the piano?

Piano Letters

III.

And what do you think? You think he can make you sing?
Think he can mourn you, rage you, re-create you for you
 when you've forgotten yourself and me and everything
 that makes you me?
Think he'll let you lay hands on him the way I let you me?

Will he love your insolent beating? your incessant cheating?
Will he stand for days of silence? for a dampening of dynamics,
 for overwrought diction, forced notation and one-sided
 conversation?

Will he be able to support your sporadic attention? your compulsive
 addiction to sound, to expression, to weeping and screaming,
 to loving and bleeding?
Will he understand the swooning, the blackouts, the channeling
 of ear and body and God and oneness?

Lessons: Consummate Grief

Ruth had said the Recovering Musician's hands looked like hers.

Before the spots, the creases, the gnarliness set in.

Small hands. Strong hands. Pretty hands.

Blue-collar-washer-woman/welder hands: short, powerful fingers
on broad palms.

Gentle, maker hands.

Hands the Recovering Musician cherished because Ruth had loved them.

Hands the Recovering Musician peeled and ate because Ruth had loved them.

Hands the Recovering Musician buried in silence, after she'd consumed all the music
Ruth had left her.

The Parable of the Weeds, as Explained to the Recovering Musician
(Matthew 13:36-43)

The one who sowed the good daughter is me, the Mother.
The field is the piano, and the good daughter stands for the Mother.
The bad daughter is the daughter of the Father, and the Father is Satan
incarnate; the Father is the enemy.
The harvest is the piano recital, and the harvesters are those who congratulate
me, the Mother, on how hard my good daughter practiced, how well
she performed, how pretty and small her dress made her look
in the lime-light.
The weeds are the spirits of rebellion, fostered by the Father and the radio;
they must be exorcised.
I, the Mother, will send out my power, my love, to weed the daughter of all
sprigs of independence, creativity, and ego.
These weeds take the form of burnable materials: shorts worn under mandatory
skirts, two-piece swimsuits, alternative music, books without pictures,
and all other forms of paper secrets.
These weeds will be flushed, pitched, burnt, or ripped into finger-sized strips
for eating.
This will cause weeping and gnashing of teeth.
Then the good daughter will again be pretty and belong to the Mother.
She who has ears, let her hear.

Piano Letters

IV.

In my dreams still I am you
my strings your chords my keys
your teeth my hammers your
lips my pedals your tongue I
play you tune ballooning
belly swelling mouth drumming
tongue against teeth exploding no
imploding you I swallowed your
words consumed my hands bound
my feet banned you days my
nights belong to you anyway

Letter to an Ex-Stalker

How I stalk myself
with you—memory's
constructions of
you—like a scent
its object, a mouth
its breath, a word
its tongue, a hammer
its string; like a note
its pitch and a belly
its feet. You are
only me. Yours
is the lid I cannot
let close, the wound
I tend with salt
and carefully.

The Piano Closet: Eulogy for the Piano Teacher

Ruth in the thumb-frayed edges of the wrong piece
of music, in the dust let loose from its pages,
in the scores of scores not-quite-the-right-one
stuffed into all reachable space.

Ruth in the haphazard hierarchy of genius: Glover
next to Schumann over Bach below Gillock.

Ruth in the clover footstool for reaching the unreachable.

Ruth in the hanging mirror on the face of an open door.

Ruth in the easy closeness of overstuffed space.

Ruth in the pull-chain bulb: functional, essential, light
minus glare and diffusion.

Ruth in the silence, in the stillness of notes
waiting.

Coda: “Accord Final”

The “Accord Final” is a sculpture by Arman, a French/American artist, of a busted and bronzed baby grand piano.

It was as if Arman had known how it would end for them,
the RM and her piano, known it the way ancient
Greeks had known the secret bodies of stones;
perhaps he started it the day of their first recital.
He would have begun tentatively, a mortician arranging
his corpse: he folded the soundboard carefully,
embalmed its legs with uncrumpable metal, crossed
its strings, de-felted hammers nine and ten, not twelve,
and then he nailed its body to a cement stage, nailed
it in the permanent shadow of the performance hall.
But something in its ordered creases disappointed even
a dandelion spore searching for some silt-filled
pocket or knot of string, some tangled dysfunction
to hold onto or lose itself in.

II. Flight: Alien(N)ation

“[M]usical fugues are so named because they are involved in a restless process of exile and return.” (Robert W. Rudnicki, *Percyscapes: The Fugue State in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction*)

“We write, we paint, throughout our entire lives as if we were going to a foreign country, as if we were foreigners inside our own families [. . .]. Between the writer and his or her own family the question is always one of departing while remaining present, of being absent while in full presence, of escaping, of abandon.” (Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*)

Paris: Resurrection

“We Need a Dead(wo)man to Begin” (Helene Cixous, *Three Step on the Ladder of Writing*).

0:18. Thanksgiving in Paris and she’s sitting on a toilet, in a white room with a wooden door, waiting for sleep to find her in a different longitude and an oblong pill that could be a knife with blunt-round edges, thinking, “This is how you kill someone. This is how you murder a beautiful woman.”

San Juan: Because Closing Precedes Opening

“In Dogon [. . .] the terms expressing the notions of ‘to open’ and ‘to close’ come from a single root whose first meaning is ‘to close’. . . . Since it is the simple root that connotes the idea of ‘to close,’ and the derived form that of ‘to open,’ it seems legitimate to argue that the concept of closing precedes that of opening, and that one cannot, in Dogon logic, open a door until it has previously been closed” (Genevieve Calame-Griaule).

Before dawn they started, that first
morning.

 She walked in ocean
with sand-gripping toes.

 He danced
the beach in dry black shoes, knees
high-lifting away.

 The waves came
in, the sand went out, yet the earth
did not go with it.

 The water filled
and, draining, opened
 the space between.

First. You make her a woman. You say, "You are a woman," so that she understands this is an insult.

Mexico City: Anfiteatro Simon Bolivar Centro Historico

A blonde-haired, blind, blue-eyed woman stares
out from a fresco. The woman above her grabs
her own face, and blood tears run from shut eyes.
A pink mouth opens. Golden-heads, angels,
look on disinterestedly. Their hands are large,

too large, all of them, for their bodies: angels,
humans, blind, saintly, humble or proud—hands
outsize their figures. But the blind woman
has been given no hands. What do they not want her
to do? What has she been unable to feel?

Her mouth is closed with lines of silence grown
deep from too many missed opportunities to speak.
Her shoulders slump with dis- or overuse.
The skin beneath her blind eyes sags beneath
the weight of images she cannot let go or down.

Images replaying on the dark cinema of her mind
for all days. She cannot stop them, even for sleep.
They are chimes at the hour and every heart-beat marks
the passage of one. In such a way she lives a thousand
life-times in one. This is why her shoulders stoop,

why the woman behind her grabs bleeding eyes. This
woman has seen the blind's nightmares, read them
on the blanks of unseeing eyes. This woman bleeds
tears because she has seen herself, her present, past
and future self there in a too old, young woman's face.

Second. You take away her sexuality. You cast it out of her like a demon at six years old—or if it hangs on, you pull up your sleeves and bare your raven claws, those pure white, unpainted, French-tipped claws, and force them, raking, down her maw.

Rip it forth—rip, rip, rip it out, because Momma wants a purple-heart ribbon.

(Sometimes you just get part of it. Then she is of two inclinations, never understanding desire, so be thorough. Be sure. There is another entrance. Rip. A woman must be clean.)

Riga: Land Otherwise Known as Oz, Where the Women Wear Fur and Pointy-toed
Boots to Beat the Wicked Witch of the East

Twenty-five hours of flying, and spring comes on
dangerously. Drippy streets full of loud: echoing
feet and voices and pigeons' blue-breasted cooing.
Sun melts rooftops, and ice-sheets fall in clumps
onto cobbled streets. The women walk
in stilettos. They do not trip or fall. The sky
falls in Latvia. It is cold and wet
in the feet-loud street, and there is the wind
in the eaves, and the door on the third floor
which leads we-know-not-where. Oz maybe.
The land which Dorothy could not reach without
riding the wind. And maybe tornadoes
are faster than the three jets and prop plane we took
to get here. These women, they wear their pants
tucked into their boots, exaggerating
their points, and I dreamt last night that Step-
father touched me in the you-know-where place,
and I kicked him with my ruby-red shoes,
and Mother shut the door to my you-know-
which-floor, and I'm sure she wore boots because
her feet were loud and beat a pointed
retreat. I think now maybe it wasn't a house
that killed the witch when Dorothy landed.
Maybe the house was a symbol of "home,"
in my case a man, because I make my home
with him, this guy sleeping next to me,
the one I'd cut out my heart for, add sugar
or salt, say, "Take. Eat. Remember me." But
he's never asked, and he thinks I should keep it.
The women wear black with their fur coats,
and they are thin, if they're young, and quick
to laugh but not to smile. The pigeons
I understand: so many corniced rooftops.
The gulls must have ridden the wind,
maybe twenty-five hours, or a tornado.
They match the snow, but the streets
echo black! black! and unfriendly, so
unlike the coasts of the Baltic, some quiet,
white miles and sky falling a wind away.

Next. You pull and bleach and starch and spray and make unrecognizable her hair; burn her, blind her with chemicals and colors, until she no longer believes, no longer can perceive, that she is beautiful or that she is “she,” a person, a consciousness, connected to a body.

Vilnius: An old woman with tangerine

hair decides not to sit next to me
when I say “hello” to her beneath
the welcome shade of a chestnut
tree on Pilius Street, where Soviets
constructed streets and sidewalks
of headstones taken from Jewish
cemeteries after World War II,
and my shoulders cling to my spine.
Though I lightened my bag a history,
a map, and two water-bottles this
morning, I had still carried too many
unnecessary words to the corner
of disappearing names and no matter
of tightness or carriage could keep
the heart from so much scattering.

Then. You say to her repeatedly, “But you could be pretty if you would just—You could be—if you would only—.”

Make her believe she is nothing, nothing more than a rack to be hung, a sack to be slung over someone else’s more capable shoulder.

Poem, Because I Couldn't Call You

Got drunk and called you.
Hung up quickly. Not
before we talked, but
before we said anything.

And I had wanted to talk
of kites and strings, of how
I watched you walk, watched
your hair lifting and falling

in your own wind,
of how you touched me
in one blue-sky moment,
had wanted to say,

March is coming
and you always flew
so beautifully, so
tragically, so heart-

breakingly haphazardly,
and I had no whole-
heart piece left grown strong
enough to hold your string.

Playing Cards

She liked Spider Solitaire, a game of sure hearts.

She liked to play it with just two suits: hearts and spades.

She liked the sure clicks of the mouse, the agility of her thumb to select and slide one card over another, the security of “Control-Z” to undo a mismatch, the vision of “M” to show her overlooked cards, the secure blanket of “D,” knowing that there are more cards in the deck, the tactfulness of “I Want to Start a New Game” tucked up discreetly under the game key, the option to choose: Easy, Medium, Difficult.

She especially liked to play it in her borrowed basement room in Kansas that smelled of must and heat and someone else’s marriage.

She played it late into the July nights, played until the batteries gave out on her computer, until its electric heat burnt the tops of her thighs, until she finally fell asleep despite the emptiness beside—inside—her.

She missed him, absently, when she ate her dinner alone with a television and the stifling heat.

She missed him, gallantly, when she felt the spiders move in their webs in the night.

She missed him, laughingly, when she found a spider hanging from her hair.

She missed him, safely, when the dark had wrapped itself around her so surely she forgot where and who she was, why she was alone, her bed as empty as she.

She liked to play Spider Solitaire, a game of sure hearts.

She liked to place one sure heart over another sure heart, one definite spade over another definite spade with measured and finite hands, with calculated practice, navigating the desperate dark that separated her cards from their proper spots, that desperate dark swirling her bed as doggedly as the heat and his absence that seeped through cracks in her cement.

She missed him daily, nightly, minutely, achingly, missed him, knowing that his half-hearted presence hadn’t been all that different than these full-fledged absences, missed him, perpetually, realizing she really missed herself, missed him, assuredly, because he was a spade that she couldn’t drag even from here to there, no matter how many hearts she carried with her.

Make her feel this is her body: this white room in a foreign country, in the middle of the night where sleep, where mind-quiet, will not come; this room, all marble and tile and light—artificial light—mirror and tub held together with bolts and putty; her heart this faucet that must be turned on and off by a disembodied hand; her mind this light of artificial knowledge, this light that gives no heat, no warmth, no soft-yellow-summer sun but blue-white like the winter sunlight reflected off snow—

it's a cold knowing born of a hard-bristled brush in a tub
just like this one, and your hand scrubbing his words that
she, at three, could not yet read, would never understand,
words he had written onto her soft, baby-body, and into this
hard woman-body she does not now own;

this body with a tongue like this ring, this rail by which she keeps herself from
falling into and running out of her mind; this scrolled molding, the words she has
not said, cannot say, words that cut into her cheeks like so many razor teeth, that
carve themselves into her skin like the convex and concave grooving of too-little
flesh over too-much bone; this cold body; this already-almost-always dead body.

Vilnius: Outside the KGB Museum

a pigeon cooed. The wind blew. Rain
swelled the clouds that cooled the sun.

Inside, the guide spoke of doors extending into ceilings and floors. Of security
in multiplicity. Of oak and steel and iron. Oak for the entry. Steel
for the foyer. Iron for the window. Spoke of locks on the bedroom.
Locks on the water closet. Locks on the kitchen. Locks to determine
the price of real estate after the Gaon, after Hitler and the German
“solution,” after the KGB, after the Partisan Rebellion, after
the Revolution.

I toured the prison: Holding, Interrogation, Lavatory, Padded/Straight-Jacket, Isolation
(two-by-five-foot square), With-Held Library and Medical, Ice, Execution.

She spoke of numbers. Three hundred thousand. She said.

I fingered names scratched into cement walls, bullet-pocks. Three hundred thousand.
They said.

I knelt on glass-encased floors and sifted sand and teeth
and buttons with the two-pronged fork of my eyes,
felt the cold corners reach the center of the room.

Three hundred thousand. It said.

Outside, a pigeon and wind.
The sun and the rain.

Before leaving, I took a picture that I knew
could not come out: the beauty of green
cell doors standing open.

Do not mourn it. Do not mourn the body.

Mourn the woman. Mourn that she was ever identified as beautiful, that this is why you had to cut her out, force her into her head, that cramped, blind space, that infinite black, void and voiding space, that this is why she was murdered.

Again. Mourn the woman. Not that one or the other one. Not that random girl. But this one. Mourn this woman. The one you murdered.

SheLovesMe/SheLovesMeNot/HeLovesMe/HeLovesMeNot/SheLovesMe/SheLovesMe

The pallbearers wore sweatpants.
 They played "Peace in the Valley" and "All
 I Do I Do For You" on a tape recorder.
 At the gravesite, Katherine stood on the casket,
 pulling roses from Mother's stand-in
 bouquet, shouting, "Did y'all get
 what ya' wanted from Grandma?"
 Petal by petal, they designate a hierarchy
 of name-bearing blood: sons,
 grandsons, great-grandsons, etc.
 No roses for the childless, until Father, Eldest Son,
 gave me his: "Daughter."
 They put a crossword puzzle, stuffed bunny
 rabbit, and pictures of all six children,
 twenty-six grandchildren, eight great-
 grandchildren, and the single great-great
 grandchild in the casket.
 They dressed her in a knit cotton tee-shirt.
 Step-mother forgot me, left me at the gravesite
 to beg a ride back to town from Aunt Blondie.
 Adopted Sister wasn't allowed to carry the casket
 or sit with Dad because she wasn't real blood.
 After the burial, back at the doublewide for a chili
 feed—"Fred and Lillian's Bunny Farm,
 We Sell Pets or Meat"—Grandfather panicked:
 "Oh, Mama!" he cried, meaning Grandmother.
 They had met at a county dance, fourteen and sixteen,
 wed two weeks later, lived married sixty
 years, and "never in love a day of their life."

Mexico City: The Wall

the rich do not escape

window-pictures of

razor wire and walls

mountains against

squatters

a boy crumbling

styrofoam snow

between two girls dancing

midnight in the street

all the permanent poor

Do it in the morning. Mourn her as you watch the sun climb the sky. Mourn her with the rhythm and pacing of her feet, her feet, trailing your flat horizon, her feet repeating your words until they become her words: "You are not good enough. Not-good-enough. Notgoodenough. I am not ever, no, not-ever, canneverbe, good enough. enough." Enough.

Prague: Picture an Old Couple in Shirtsleeves, Embracing Atop an Old Soviet
Building, Blue-Cloud Sky Behind Them

A lazy morning out, then back to Vladimir's flat. Soprano
and percussion from an apartment next door.

When we arrive too early, a plump, naked, bird-woman
flits from open door to water closet and tries to explain

what needs none. Her widow-words settle over us
like dust on unused curtains: *I am friend. Friend and no wife.*

Church bells. Helicopters above, voices and birds beneath,
traffic. Their living room smells sharply of dog, dry bread,

and abandoned must. A many-thumbed Czech-
English dictionary lay open on the table between us.

Mourn murdered beauty. Mourn her. Mourn yourself until your mourning becomes her morning. Mourn until your sea becomes her sky, and she becomes the sun, trailing an unfolding horizon.

Yes. Mourn/morn her until she is reborn.
Paris will rebirth her.

Yes. This is how a beautiful woman is resurrected.

Razing the Watchtower

I found my first love in a hay bale—my first bee sting, first rattlesnake, first histamine-blocking sneeze.

His name was Jesse. Jesse Paul. And he lived on a farm outside of town. His dad worked at John Redmond Reservoir where there was a watchtower for firemen, deer and quail hunters, and drunken high school kids to climb on full-moon nights and smoke weed while the trees whisper-talked them into resurrecting discarded dreams.

Jesse was Mexican-Indian and white. He was confused and proud and easily wounded. He was fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen when I knew him. I was ten, eleven, twelve. He was a boy who wanted to be a man.

We first kissed in the hay bale outside his parents' house. It was his birthday and summer, and I was tan and blonde and my hips hadn't even begun to spread yet. It was a party with gifts and marshmallows, laughter and sweat, the prickly hay scratching at my legs, my throat, catching in my lungs, holding the heat around us, opening its secret spaces, and the dust swirling in fingers of sunlight that probed our shared, our sacred, our secret dark.

That day he gave me his football jersey and his tongue in my mouth and I wasn't sure of either. But he had large canines that dipped below the others. He had straight incisors. His teeth glistened inside his skin when he smiled. I was sure of that.

For three years, I wore his jersey and watched him run the field. His body was fluid: muscle and youth and male. He was beautiful. When I was sad, he sang me "When a Man Loves a Woman" in his attic bedroom with arched ceilings and a sheet for

a door and curtains. When he was sad, I played him “Scotch Poem” on my mother’s piano, compassion flooding from wooden floor to vaulted ceiling.

It was summer again, when it ended: the fourth of July and a party. We were at his grandparents’ farm on the reservation just outside of Horton. It was a perfect day. We had ridden four-wheelers, roasted hot dogs and marshmallows, eaten them with pickles and chocolate and sticky fingers, watched the fireworks, then danced together in the lake, all awkward slippery adolescent limbs, all grown-up, practiced kisses, all summer bodies glistening after the sky had grown quiet and white with the moon.

He wanted to have sex. I wanted to wait. Two weeks. Then I could at least say I was a teenager. We came home the next day and he dumped me for a Heather who lived next door and allegedly had had sex with eight guys in one night.

Years later, past that sober morning after I had swallowed a bottle of Advil that didn’t kill me but left ulcers in my throat, past the drunken watchtower nights of reliving old dreams, I saw him at a Pancake Feed, some children’s Make-A-Wish benefit, in our former high-school cafeteria.

He had a girl and his parents with him. She had blonde hair and wore a Northface vest: one of those moneyed, outdoor, hippy kinds of chicks.

He wouldn’t look at me. Wouldn’t look up. Not once. I know. I stared.

He had grown his hair out, wavy and long. He had been to Peru or Guatamala or El Salvador, the Peace Corps in South America—just like we always said he would. He was beautiful.

And as I caught myself, checked myself before calling out to him, his family, his girl, and all those pancakes, before raking up all those broken words that would rip my

throat into a thousand bleeding sores—“Damn it, Jess! I was just a girl”—I remembered that I was living my own half of our dream, teaching writing and writing poems on multiple continents, married to my own proud and confused, easily wounded, beautiful, mixed-race man. And I stopped prying him with my eyes, because I didn’t have to say anything. I didn’t have anything to say.

I finished eating my pancakes, and while he quietly left by the back side-door, I walked out of the front, into the full, cool light of a new April morning.

First. She must trail beauty in all the known haunts—the street’s sweet crepe-carts and patisseries; poodle shit, mixing with rain and new cement; this mixing of the young man, the old woman, kneeling silent, eyes down, of the pan-pipes and the accordion, the sulfur, the cigarette smoke from the open door of that café, the shuffling, bustle of bodies entering, now exiting, the gringy, white tunnels of the metro, these tired men, yawning in the yellow of Van Gogh’s hay bale, this young girl, skipping in purple rain boots.

Vilnius: The Ratonda. Arrived

yesterday. The day was cool
and gray. A jostling, beeping
drive through the city's history:
Beautiful. Awe-ful. I know
no comparable history. A girl's
shoes fill the courtyard below
our window. She has long brown
hair. She wears jeans and walks
with an assuredness I've outgrown.
We will move to the academy's
apartment and there stand
across from the Parliament where
Lithuanians withstood Russian
tanks in '91. Across the alley,
there is a red rose on a green sun
porch, and I have seen it bloom.

Second. She must trail the birds to Notre Dame, must recognize the flying buttresses, the
exo-skeleton, the beauty of a structure turned inside-out.

Average

My father taught me to shoot for just above “average.”

In my thirtieth year my mother asked, “Is that how you felt? That you didn’t fit in anywhere?”

It wasn’t hard in a town of nine hundred people to determine the average, acceptable personality, dress, gender, sexuality, occupation, talent, hobbies, social circle, etc.

In a town of nine hundred farmers, ranchers, bankers, and sports enthusiasts, it was not hard not to fit the average. Some of us were simply born to it.

My father’s family moved to Lebo, Kansas, from the next town over when he was six years old. They moved into the trailer park on the south side of the tracks that split our town in halves, the tracks that were meant to be laid in Arvon, an abandoned Welsh town three miles north of Lebo, just southwest of Sundance Point on the Marais des Cygnes River Valley Reservoir. There’s a bait shop on the corner that marks the turnoff. The town holds five or six empty houses, a boarded-up church, and a cemetery tucked beneath a ring of big-leaved catalpa trees where my uncle Gene is buried.

After Gene’s funeral, I sat in the back of my mother’s car with my stepfather and my new husband. Stepfather was quiet, not looking outside the car at the families, not looking inside at us. We had been talking about the trees and a balloon ceremony that Gene’s graduating class had planned for the next day. Stepfather was sure the balloons would get caught up in the trees—not that he believed in the new-age grieving ritual, but

he understood the symbolism of the act and knew it would be ruined if the balloons couldn't just float away.

I was thinking about how I had had sex with a boy who had a mullet and a rusted blue Camaro—it had been the 80s—here in high school when Stepfather said it.

“If I were to do it, I would use a gun.”

My attention was drawn back into the car with an audible click.

“I wouldn't do it in the car, though. Not in a running car.” He looked up with level eyes.

I looked away, looked outside the car and saw Evan, Gene's father, Stepfather's cousin and best friend, a kind, philandering, smiling-drunk of a man, not smiling now, for the first time I could remember, not smiling. He was helping his wife into the backseat of a long, dark car. His age-splotched, gnarled-knuckle, clutch of a hand cradled hers.

I cried then. Not because Gene had killed himself while his wife ran back into the house for a coat, her purse, her keys; not because he had worked for Big Brothers Big Sisters and would help no more children; not because his parents, his sisters, his wife, would set one less place each Thanksgiving and Christmas; not that his wife buried her husband with no seed in her womb; and not that I would never know this man who so many seemed to love and care for—I cried because I knew the man who sat across from me, who so calmly, so matter-of-factly laid his choices out in front of me, had weighed his options, had already come up with a plan.

And I cried because I had my own plan, but I couldn't share it, couldn't make it public, couldn't let the man who raised me be a part of it—this closed-off, satirical,

reserved, taught muscle of a man who would've done anything for me, bought anything for me, but who struggled to speak anything real to anybody, was sharing his suicide plan with me and I couldn't reciprocate. He had finally opened up, but I wouldn't invite him in, not even then.

Death is private, I thought.

My death will be mine, I thought. *The one thing I can keep all to myself, the one thing that I don't have to try to make fit in with anyone.*

But he was older. He was closer. And I think he knew, as he looked over at me and at my quiet, new husband, that our deaths are never really just our own.

The Rub

2:00 a.m. and I can't sleep.
 Wind moves the wooden
 partition separating
 our cement square
 from the neighbor's
 cement square.

Realtors call these patios.

2:13 It rubs the wall,
 an uncomfortable
 sound, a distasteful
 ha-rumphing, a
 down-right whine—
 like two legs forced
 together in too-tight
 jeans or siblings
 at Christmas.

2:19 Chamomile tea. Sip. Set. Sip. Set.
 Listen to the wind outside.

2:32 A heat wave. In March.
 Seventy-eight tomorrow.
 I plan which shoes to wear.

Wore the wrong ones
 to Danny and Donnie's
 fiftieth anniversary: boots
 instead of heels.

Mother had said, "But you've
 got to come. These
 are the good cousins,"
 mistaking the heart's
 four discrete chambers:
 us, them, good, bad.

I sat at their papered table, covered
 in all the good cousins'
 well-meaning congratulations.

Eventually, they went away,
 those good cousins, and I
 was left speaking to the other,
 the stepfather, of trivial things—
 birthdays, weather, things left
 undone, things we never do,
 may not even want to.

When we ran out of things to not
 really say, we sat smiling
 uncomfortably and for real.

She took thirty minutes to say
 goodbye to the cousins.

2:58 More tea.

Sip. Set.

Maybe it wasn't her fault.

Sip. So many well-meaning
 cousins wanting to be
 missionaries and priests,
 wives and mothers.

I'd wanted a shot in the parking lot. Set.

3:03 And father said it: "the problem
 with divorce is kids and parents
 never really get to know each
 other."

3:07 Stranger-parents. Stranger-families. This is what I have.

Set. Set. Re-set.

3:14 And it's become the cliché of a generation.

Sip.

Set.

Divorce.

Set.

How can anyone find time for aunts or uncles or cousins?

Even the “good” ones?

Sip.

Set.

3:29 My tea is cold and too sweet at the bottom. I drink it anyway.

Sip. Set. Sip. Set. Set.

Next. She must trail the clouds and the rain to Sacre Coeur. Must climb the stairs in the rain, climbing, climbing, until her feet beat-beat a pattern she can't regulate, can't imitate, climbing, climbing, until she can climb no more, climbing, climbing, until she can see both city and heaven and understand that they are not separate, but that they are each and that they are one.

Vilnius: Waiting

for the sun and a ride to Trakai
Castle in a bright, clouded
city full of water and wind
and green; a woman
at the shops, selling linen
and amber, says, "Lithuania
means 'Land of Rain.'"

Trakai: Driving back

the castle was closed, but
the sky was not. Two rain-
bows, one over the other,
in the gathering cold over
moving gray water.

Then. She must find Chopin's bust in the rain. Must trail the broken stairs into Le Cimetiere du Pere-Lachaise. Must face the patriarch, her connection to music, her reconnection to, her recollection of, the body. She must see the sunlight in the flowers, the rain on their petals, the rain and the sun next to and within the white of the marble. Must wait until her seeing becomes her becoming, until beauty tattoos its name to her frame, calling itself out from inside her. Must stand in the rain until rain soaks through her coat. Must wait until the smell of its wet wool wakes her nose. Until the water reaches her skin, spreads wide, right and left, across her shoulders, trickles down her back, T's, both to the right and to the left, just below her waist.

Occupation

and all she'd ever really wanted was to be his woman
 ever since second grade when he let her pretend
 she'd kissed him under the blankets during truth
 or dare
 but each day there is a time her time the time
 he wants her loves her most
 when she runs runs away from him
 45 minutes a day every day these 16 years
 she runs the highways alone
 while he eats ham and eggs and grits or toast drinks
 his coffee black not sugar
 she runs route 66 I-35 hwy 10
 she runs she runs while the sun rises
 runs while the birds open their eyes
 and sometimes the wind is at her back
 and sometimes it is not sometimes it bites
 and sometimes it cools but always there is
 this the wind and the sun even if they hide
 the wind and the sun
 and somewhere behind her he consumes his meal pays
 his bill sets his cap back on his head climbs
 into the cab of their big rig and follows her
 direction
 he would say he is always following her direction
 even when she sits beside him on their custom bench-seat
 he negates any between-ness between them his elbow
 thigh knee shoulder calf presses into hers every cell
 leaning into her skin leaning through cloth through pores through
 muscle vein and farther in presses in to bone
 as if his very bones need reassurance
 need a resurgence of her
 after all those miles she ran between them
 they spend their days in mostly silence bones
 whispering presence between them tires
 rubbing distance into the road
 and so the sun sets sometimes on their right and sometimes
 on their left and mouths open letting
 tongues talk in the dark
 she never really says aye never will say no to his
 hands lets them wander so many miniature
 dictators in their captured land
 knowing morning brings rebellion revolution victory this his her
 their occupation

She must remember what was taken.

Must feel it, written into her spine, speaking her name.

She must let the wound, that hole created by her missing, murdered “I,” move, always
moving, back to the heart.

Must feel it now in the low back, now the side, now the stomach, now the breast.

She must feel.

Umbilicus

Christmas Dinner. In lieu of a silverware tray: foil-wrapped cardboard boxes, scotch-taped at the corners. Hungryman potatoes. Saltless chicken and noodles. Gray paste boiling in a pot.
Your Aunt Blondie made that,

Dad warned me.

Grandma sat at the head of the stainless steel table and boasted of our genes: congestive heart failure, watery lung, diabetes, cracked rib.

And Grandpa, splayed back in his split-bottomed living room chair—black patch strapped to his round head, his latest donation to disease—trained his one watery eye on me.

And I remembered—

Bang! just like that, when she told me—screams coming from the closet and Momma in the kitchen, steam from the stovetop and those screams from the closet. Must've been five years old. I heard them. Those screams. And I hadn't remembered until she told me.

Grandpa held up his arms, drew me down into his tobacco-scented zipper-suit, kissed my chin.

Fifty years.

Behind his chair:

Grandma's oxygen tank. The tube tangling between grandchildren and great grandchildren's legs, kinking and hissing and writhing.

It's been fifty years. She's carried this for fifty years.

Dad tripped over it, cursed, and tossed my coat into the exes' bedroom from the door.

And I was there. I heard it. Back then. But I didn't remember. And then it was like I was back there. Outside that door, the steam in the kitchen, and Momma, and I, I didn't do nothing. I heard her scream, and I didn't do nothing. Didn't even remember.

Smoke, curling, climbed the corner cabinet and swarmed the picture of Dad in his ruffled blue tux.

*You know, I had an aunt, tiny thing,
covered her mouth with her hand when she smiled, wouldn't
look you in the eye. Everybody said she was retarded. Never
married. Stayed with her folks till the day they died.
She was eleven when he did it.*

Eleven!

And she never talked.

Never said nothing to nobody.

Just covered her face

when she smiled.

After dinner,

*Lucky—the peach toy poodle—bit Grandma, so
she showed us how to clot a cut with sugar.*

They called her Retard.

*We nodded, trained our eyes on the berries
budding on her needled limb.*

See.

*In the room with the coats,
the “ex-”walls smiled: clusters of women
and children in Sunday paisley
—ex-wives, ex-cousins, ex-us'es.*

*I found my own eyes there,
half opened against the light of a Wal-Mart
flash. My mother beaming, her back to the flat green forest,
holding me with both hands, her diamond
pressing into my skin.*

*When it was time to leave, Dad
got my coat, helped me to the door, and when we smiled
goodbye, we,*

each one,

could see the other's smile.

Sweet Bread

Blondie is a third-born daughter given the same name—Kathleen—as one dead and one live sister because her mother had been determined to have a Kate. She was named for loss and named for hope, named by a woman whose own inherited definition of love had to include both.

I had a waking dream that Satan
visited me while my husband
slept noisily next to me. He was
a voice. Satan was. Cold. Rumbly.
Inaudible. Internal. Kinesthetic.
He wanted to scare me. Satan did.
And I had to pray, if I wanted him
out of me. His voice. Out. But
I didn't think I believed in prayer.

Blondie, now, in her new kitchen on a soft fall day, making sweet bread, the dough sticking to her fingers, the fried bread fresh from the hot pan dripping butter onto her Formica counters and her bare feet. Singing and dancing on butter-greased tiles, she teaches her niece to work the dough with her strong hands, her shoulders hitching and hunching in an equally lifting and falling gesture.

Dreamt last night that brother C
said he had spoken with Satan.
Said he had spoke, "Goodbye."
Satan had. And that made sense
to me, because "goodbye" is the
scariest word in the English language.
C said dream-Satan was really Dad,
which made sense because when Dad
left, Mother said he was a monster. Dad.
She said a lot. She ate butter from the stick.

A new batch. Taking turns, together, Aunt and Niece, swirl the Crisco, yeast, and warm water with their fingers, watching it foam, then finding it risen, double its size, all warm and airy and light, full of so much of itself to give, full of love, full of calories.

Turns out we slept two nights
with the back door unlocked.
Everyone sleeps with their doors
unlocked back home, but I locked Dad's,
after my cousin, Blondie's son,
the pants-down-kiss-tag-in-the-dark
kid grown drunk-man, threatened
to kill his parents then goaded Dad into
punching him down in his driveway.

Now, on their fifth batch, Aunt and Niece each are too tired to do one more, one more,
one more, so Blondie punches it back down, lets the air out, smooshes it, covers it up,
whispers, "Do it again. Just give me a minute. Then do it again."

After locking the front door,
I realized there were three side
doors, two screen doors, and five—
no, six—body-size windows
that could operate as doors, and
I gave up sleep, lay in the dark
with the train outside and the forced
cold in, hoping against loss for change.

Yes. Beauty must hurt. Because in pain there is mourning, and in mourning there can be resurrection, a possibility for the woman to understand that this, this, now, is her hand on the faucet, these her fingers pulling on, pulling off, the boot, these, her feet, now bare, warm, against the cold tile, this, now, her voice, repeating your words, now creating her own, her eyes judging, now touching, now holding, molding, this face, breathing in, and this the mirror image, this, her body, now turning, marble, now, wooden, but turning, now turning, flesh, mind in body, together, turning into, no, turning towards, a door and a less permanent sleep.

Normal: A Re-Definition

Normal used to be lynchings on Sunday with fried-chicken lunches in the park.
Normal allowed the rape of women and children and kindness and God.

Normal blobs and blahs and shoves its flawed arms over the mouths of its children.

Normal is un-American.
Normal is a U.S. citizen.

Normal is small and uninteresting and dangerous.

Normal is scary.
Normal is scared.

Normal is a domestic military, an infantry, an army of kamikaze wives and mothers, husbands and fathers, brothers too numbed and too dumb to feel the hearth fires burning their eyes, their feet, their backs, their hands, their children (these, their last normalized dreams).

Normal is abnormal. Normal is terrific. Normal is malicious. Normal is after us.

Normal wears a white hat and a smile to hide his fangs.

Normal watches football and sitcom TV.
Normal does not watch national or world news.

Normal may have a college degree.

Normal may or may not go to church on Sundays.
Normal may or may not ever read (have ever read) the Bible.
Normal calls itself Christian.

Normal huddles in families.
Normal squirts out kids.
Normal cuts them up if they aren't all normal.

Normal feeds itself on the abnormal: the fat, the foreign, the fag, the nerd, the genius,
the geek, the vegetarian, the vegan, the ugly, the beautiful, the retarded, the artist,
the anything-other, the other-than-average.
Normal eats these with a knife and a spoon.

Normal hangs a napkin from his chin.

Normal drips hate and fear and envy from his bone-picked grin.

III. The Epic Female: The Female Epic

“The writers I feel close to are those who play with fire, those who play seriously with their own mortality, go further, go too far, sometimes go as far as catching fire, as far as being seized by fire.” (Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*)

“[T]hose who write the books that hurt us also suffer, also undergo a sort of suicide, also get lost in forests—and this is frightening. [. . .] Because of this strange connection between writing and dying writers feel a strange desire for death. They feel like dying. But it is something they cannot say. I can’t say: ‘I feel like dying,’ because it is forbidden, and yet it is the only thing one should say.” (Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*)

- Doctor: “[Fugue,] the amnesiac desire to forget one’s ‘home’ and history through forms of escape [. . .]. [T]he characters who experience some type of fugue state symbolize, or personify, the tensions between the self as *immanent* and the self as *transcendent*: the immanent self is caught in a loop of remembrance, mired in time and place; the transcendent self is amnesiac, unmotivated by history.”¹
- Professor: Metaphors for feminist teaching revolve around “nurturing” and “mothering.”²

“Sonny’s Blues”

(If James Baldwin Had Been a No-Name, Confessional Woman from Kansas
Who Wrote Poetry Instead of Fiction after Quitting Music)

And don’t you know, Brother,
Keeper, you left me in a cornfield
with no visible stars? Left me
in Chevys with blue fabric seats
that burn the insides of young girls’
knees? Left me with men who smelled
of beer and Skoal and mint? Left me
because I was weight and remembering,
because I was payment and easily
left, forgotten, given. And why,

Brother, how, was/is it so easy
to leave? You forget our mother.
You forget yourself when you
forget me. Like Sonny, I drown
in me and you are the only one
who can teach me to breathe. You
said, *There’s no way not to suffer*,
the night closing in and I didn’t want
to believe you. You said you loved me.
And still—still?—still I believe you.

Miss: “[T]he overwhelming [media] message is that to be socially acceptable, a woman must be feminine, and that includes having, or at least appearing to have, two full breasts.”³

Our Lady of Wheat

She was just another misunderstood
Plains-woman. You know how it is

with those feminists. They wear the hat,
the chaps. They strap on the gun, the bow

and arrow. They learn to ride, to shoot,
to deny their hearts a full womb. They

grow beards to hide their faces—or so
we want to believe. We Prufrocks

so afraid of Amazons: “They’re called
boobs, Ed.”* Our Camilla was a new breed

of feminist, a third-wave girl, not one-
breasted, but one-bared. Stolen then

bartered by Daddy, unmatched by mortals
at wheat-racing, spoils-chasing, and man-

killing—we amputate her memory because
we cannot afford her beauty and greatness.

* (Erin Brokovitch, *Erin Brokovitch*.)

Professor:

The names of women who teach may include but are not limited to the following: Professor (teacher, i.e., read one breast), Doctor (academic authority, read male), Miss (woman, i.e., read two breasts), Mrs. (wife, mother), Hey!?! (no-name or nobody). These names are, in turns questions, for both the teacher and her students, of the authority and identity of women as academics, composition theorists, writers, and feminists. This is where authority and identity begin to overlap. To prevent a future where women remain as nameless as those in our Western literary tradition, we must continue to identify ourselves, our multiplicity of selves, through our writing, in our classrooms, to our students and within our universities.⁴

Postcards from Faerie Land: Confessions of a Third-Wave Feminist

I. Picture of Woolf in a Bad Hat with Quotation:

"Men may congratulate themselves for writing truly and passionately about the movements of nations; they may consider war and the search for God to be great literature's only subjects; but if men's standing in the world could be toppled by an ill-advised choice of hat, English literature would be dramatically changed" (Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*).

A table of drying permanent press,
three burnt bulbs, and me, folding
laundry in the dark. In Columbus,
Ohio, a woman with broken English
found me, cried, "Oh, my God! You
his wife!" and petted my arm, then took
my seat. And what ever happened to
Britomart? After she found her knight,
mended his ego, managed his kingdom?
He pursued truth and glory; she did laundry.*

No one would mistake Brit for Sir,
for anything-other-than-Mrs., again.
And maybe I want them to call me
Dr., Ph.D., so they can't call me wife.
In Columbus, a friend and fellow Mrs.,
joking, introduced me as a trophy.
Who's laughing? I am the ring-bearer,
and I begin to understand it will take
my life. Knights choose armor because
it's lance-resistant and dry-clean-only.

* So, a girl saw a boy in a magic mirror. She fell in love. It's an old story. Here's the twist: our girl refused to wait for Art to save her. She wanted to be the savior. Speculate. If you want. Maybe she didn't really believe a girl could be saved. Maybe she wanted her own magic lance. We do know she taught herself to fight. We know she killed this bad guy and that bad girl. We know our Brit was a damn fine knight. And we know, ultimately, her arms, though strong enough to nurture and save, were not enough to win his heart.

For Billie

who sings beneath
the pitch, behind
the beat, between
the chest and head,
simultaneously nasal
and throaty; who
uses rests as music,
as punctuation, as
silent soloing member,
because it's the ones who
can no longer sing
she listens to,
sings to—no, for—
giving voice
to their absence—no,
their omnipresence.

Miss: “In an effort to be positive, those professionally involved with women who have had breast surgery always emphasize that life can continue as normal afterwards. Yet the terms in which that normality are offered are usually restricted to superficial and disempowering stereotypes. [. . .]. There are no visible role models for [their] new identit[ies].”⁵

Because the Postmodern Romeo and Juliet are Mutually, Passively-Aggressively Suicidal
and Homicidal

I loved a man who tried to kill me: not once, but twice, and always. Loved that he called me angel, sixteen and believing love could actually save. Loved that no one else loved him—not his mother who spanked him with high-heeled shoes, not his father who drugged him with beer in a baby-bottle, not his teachers, not his friends, not his “big brother” charity-molester—but me. I loved him, bound him to me because he was the only one who could never leave, and he was the only one who ever really tried, ever really meant, to: pushed me into highways, locked me in closets, held me so tight he fingerprinted my arms, thighs, stomach—God, he puppet-danced me—bought a gun, waited on back country roads with crickets and trains and the moon larger than all of Coffey County, and my whole heart just sort of stuck there with him, all of me, helpless in his dimples, because he saw me, knew me, and still he wanted me, and because I never really loved me anyway, and because—O God—he had those hands, and he held me—roughly, strongly—held me to him.

Doctor:

“[C]ognitive *dissonance*, an equal psychological desire for two extremes which often renders one incapable of acting upon either impulse. It is this existential paradox of wanting to both join the world and escape it, both to overcome the Other by succumbing to it and yet retain *la difference*, that finds natural expression in the literary figure of the fugal self.”⁶

Delilah/Bride of Frankenstein/Eve/Princess Dimensia

These are the names chosen for our dead woman
 slash guardian angel slash fairy-god slash mother
 slash witch on the cover of our thinking-
 of-you card slash creative-writing prompt

at the women's shelter. Temptress slash
 lover slash traitor slash slayer slash emblem
 of the feminine: power slash sexuality slash
 Eve-all-over-again—we get it. We're bad.

The light falls gold outside and blue in: Delilah
 appears as Frankenstein's wife, picture of the living
 dead, just another woman pieced together of mis-
 matched parts: one green, one white hand; one

green, one white foot. Green, the color of rot.
 Green, the color of new grass, new leaf, and
 sewage. White, the color of purity. White,
 the color of absence, sterility, and new paper.

We imagine she loves the unliving and the undead.
 She is me; she is you. She is all that is between
 us, the rot and the seed, the mismatched deeds
 of heart and mind. For you, now me, she is Princess

Dimensia, angel of submission and casting spells.
 She is right now tempting slash loving slash
 betraying no slaying you no you slash me, whispering:
Come now, baby. Knock down these walls.

Professor: Images of women as virtuous nurturers (i.e., mothers) hinder their abilities to succeed in the patriarchal world of academe, because the role of the nurturer has been separated from that of the intellectual by gender and function.⁷

First Step House

“The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant’s bent / shoulders [. . .]” (Ezra Pound, *Cantos*).

Seven women cram onto splitting
couches, sit close in their ill-fitted
shirts and shoes. Hair, fresh-washed,
hangs in drippy curtains about their

faces. They recite their names
like monotone lists of addictions.
A baby crawls among them.
His diaper is brown and leaking.

Most of these women are pregnant.
Most are either silent or too loud.
Most have not graduated high school.
Most will return here again. But when

the baby cries, these women will
lean forward, reach out collective
arms, purse their lips in a ready,
a practiced, “Shoosh, now, baby.”

Mrs.:

“Yet because breast cancer is about breasts, and breasts are invested with gendered social meaning, the struggle for survival is overlaid with another struggle about sexual and gender identity [. . .]. The female breast represents both sexual and related nurturing aspects of femininity. It epitomizes the duality of feminine identity in a patriarchal society. When surgery is involved in the treatment of breast cancer, then the confrontation with absolute physical death can be deflected and overlaid by concern for the death of feminine identity as visually represented by the sexual and mothering breast. Mastectomy can be experienced not only as the loss of a complete breast or breasts, but as a loss of social identity.”⁸

Postcards from Faerie Land: Confessions of a Third-Wave Feminist

II. Picture of a Lone, Weather-beaten House on the Grieving Prairie with Handwritten

Note: It helps, I think, knowing that even our heroes fail to recognize love.*

I washed Mother's hair,
in the kitchen, over the sink,
because I could not hold her
cancer in my hand. Paint peeled
among panes, separating these
moving portraits: windmill,
horses, pond, barren ground.
From the house Step-father
built on Grandfather's land, I
could look out on all her darlings
snuffling snow. She said,
"Guilt, not love, holds you to me."

As if guilt could guide one's hands
into another's cracks with soap,
washcloth, and warm water, or
gather these wet strands strangling
the drain as though they weren't all
really broken promises: "Mother" or
"Daughter." Love, like glue, requires
the boiling of bones, the melting of
hooves that stamp the sun into evening.

* Our hero, the Red-Crosse Knight, was just another dumb bloke who mistook a fornicating spirit for his true love, Una, because he had not known her beyond the color and weight of her long, blonde hair. It happens. We've all been deceived by a Saracen. It helped, of course, that R-C wasn't too bright and was prone to jealousy and mistrust, but then Lust (or Guilt) in the right wig can look a lot like Love.

Professor: The problem becomes an issue of breast(s): the breast represents a teacher as nurturer (read good feminist), while the breasts symbolize the woman/teacher as sexual/not-nurturing (read bad feminist). Are we, any of us, prepared to recognize and fully incorporate both “breast(s)” into the feminist classroom?⁹

Ode to My Mother and Our Little Breasts

Four more days until they cut off Mother's breasts.
I wonder has she told them? Does she hold them?

Four more days until they cut off Mother's breasts.
I wonder does she rock them to sleep? Cup them

at stoplights and intersections? Stroke them in casual
conversation? Four more days. And I look down.

To think these friendly, perky tits could betray me, hurt
me, kill me, like that. So much easier if they were larger:

monstrous, heavy burdens I had to carry, lug, tie
down, hold up or onto while walking, jogging, trotting

down escalators and stairs. Not these tight, barely-jiggling-
when-jump-roping breasts. Their smooth curve, their palm-

ful, playful bounce-on-your-fingertips, smiling way
of waiting, daily, to be noticed, touched, cupped, washed,

kissed, bit, gifted into the mouth of a baby, a lover, a student,
a mother—that satin, seamless miracle, this callous, needy love.

Miss and Mrs.: “[W]omen attempting to make choices at this level deal not only with medical information but also [with] the extent to which their identity is defined by the physical aspects of a masculinized femininity.”¹⁰

My Mother is a Peacock

“My mother is a fish. [. . .] ‘Jewel’s mother is a horse’” (William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*).

She lives in Kansas. She
lives on a farm. She is
allergic to dust. My mother
drives a dual-wheel Chevy,
Ford, Dodge Ram truck.
She pulls a fifteen-foot
trailer. She wears starched
Rockies in 105-degree heat.
She is prone to sunstroke.
Because it is the Mid-west
and we can stand only so
much beauty, she wears
her plumes under her chaps,
her crest under her hat, her
long neck under a sparkle-
bolo tie. There is, of course,
the danger of being a female
peacock, so unusual in these
parts and brown, often mistook
for a turkey, shot, trussed,
and cooked for Sunday dinner.

Doctor: Since, according to Kant in 1764, the beard represents the ability to reason, and woman possesses the ability to sense, feminist teachers should imagine themselves as bearded mothers.¹¹

Postcards from Faerie Land: Confessions of a Third-Wave Feminist

III. Picture of Sisyphus in a Tutu, Rolling a Golden Globe Uphill

A red-head, all lips and legs and strapless evening gown, accepts an award for playing White House on TV, saying only a girl from the corn fields of Nebraska could be so naive as to believe a woman could be President.* And so Radigund lost Radegone to a woman playing “Knight.”*

* Geena Davis’ acceptance speech, Golden Globe Awards, 2005.

* There once was a fair but terrible queen named Radigund who ran Radegone by breaking all the men—some bad guy had broken her heart, you know how it is. And so in Radegone, the women wore tin and toted ill-gotten lances, while the men mended britches in pretty cotton dresses. The story goes like this: any man traveling past Radegone who was in love with a woman other than Radi had to fight in order to earn the right to pursue love elsewhere. No man ever beat her. But poor, beautiful, tragic, tyrannic Radi forgot—a woman’s enemy is never really a man.

Professor: Issues of authority in a female GTA's classroom can be examined via the "self," when "self" is viewed as an example of poststructuralism: a unit of "multiple selves that have been constructed over time from various texts," including personal experience, postmodern theory, feminism, and composition theory.¹²

This Being Me: The Anti-Nelly

“Nelly is always herself [. . .]. How does she remember, how does she manage, every day and every hour, to be so exactly the same?” (Cunningham).

And, if I change
from jeans to slacks, I
notice a change in accent,
in diction, in
hair attitude.

It could be as simple

as changing my shoes
or deciding on earrings, and
suddenly I’m a cowgirl,
not a hippy, a housewife, but
a fearless young girl
in slip-soled boots who
can ride racehorses,
tornadoes, or Harleys, who
prefers psychos and tequila
to poets and wine. It

could be as complicated
as a phone call from my mother, and I
stop saying what I think, stop
smiling, stop cussing, stop feeling, start
snipping all of my words
with orange-handled sewing shears.

It could be I’m crazy. More
than one person. Because
certainly I’m different
when my husband comes home
than when I sit here alone. He

walks in, and I
swipe at the counters,
fuss at my hair,
arrange my smile, because
it doesn't come naturally, this
being happy. What I mean is,
I am happy, but
I don't know how happy should act, so
I play at it, the part, and
forget that I am it.

And it shouldn't be this hard,
this being me, this
corporation of me, but
it's the training the mind holds onto,
the habit of remaking,
of submitting one's psychic structure
to the fire for remolding; it's
the process that I blame, that
I fear, that I cling to
while the door is opening.

Postcards from Faerie Land: Confessions of a Third-Wave Feminist

IV. Picture of a Drippy, Cathedral-Poked Sky: All Gothic and Grey and Taken
from the St. Thomas Bridge

So, I broke my engagement
ring in Prague: he held my right
hand after his big concert, and I
swung out my left, a gesture
of happy congrats. It dropped
onto a red cement hitching-post
in front of the Music Academy.
The band bent in and cracked:
white gold.

Try(ing) to believe
this doesn't mean anything.*

* A young girl's heart has been cut out and her body kept alive by magic potions in the House of Busirane. You know Busirane. Recognize the portraits: a woman raped by a swan, or swallowed by the earth, or squashed by a flying house in western Kansas. See the giant man-baby in swaddling clothes atop the rubble? He is sucking on her heart. But these are not our story. Ours is Amoret's. There are two versions. In 1590, her lover finds a hero to save her, and they are reunited. All is forgiven. Purity and love, restored. In 1596, the lover gives up, leaves too soon, and Amoret is broken. It's a choose-your-own-ending kind of love story.

“The I. U. Nipple”*

she called it. And how were we to know this was Venus?
This iron woman with pointy nipples and slumpy belly,
lying on her side in a seashell, both shoulders seemingly
lifted off the ground by her own lax hands. Maybe
the snaking beast between her legs? Maybe Neptune,
cranky sea god holding her in a water-swing of moss
and current, serenading her with eels, with starfish?

She

didn't fit our ideals of beauty. She didn't look like Love.
Determined feminists, we decided she must have been
trapped, as all beautiful, naked women on display must
be oppressed and not exhibitionists.

It must be so,

we thought. It was more hideous, more sinister—easier
to believe this, Love, had been forced. For what self-respecting
goddess could so willingly expose herself so wholly, so nakedly?
But then darkness fell,

the day surrendering to night, and

glittering starlight pierced the veil of our make-it-betters.
We could not ignore the ropes draping her torso: escape
flung at ungrasping hands: they hung suspended, fluttering,
escape-turned-surrender. Love's white flag, heavier
than the metal that for centuries held her erect in the center
of a reflecting pool filled with coins and other, younger,
more ambitious hearts.

* A fountain of Venus on the Indiana University campus in Bloomington, Indiana.

- Doctor: “Many studies agree that psychogenic fugues may be a substitute for suicide.
The ultimate act of self-annihilation, is after all, suicide. [. . .]It can also be the ultimate act of alienation or identity, abstraction or absorption.”¹³
- Miss and Mrs.: “[T]he problem of whether or not to commit suicide is the only real question in life.”¹⁴

Thou Art with Me (Another Dover Bitch Poem)

The bitch would not stop writing,
though her subject was dying. *Cold*.
She wrote him drinking, wrote him dangling

by a leg from that golden Chevy. Wrote
the air thick with heat and sweat and bone-
grating grit, the rocks moving against her feet.

Wrote her own peeking at his split-
apart chest, all her fear: another heart
attack. *Sharp*. The plastic sticking out

of his pocket. The round, red-and-white
peppermint that meant he'd chosen this dry drink
for drowning. *Ungiving*. The lover's fists,

her feet, her dragging him back, back, over
the crushed white rock. And the poet carving
his words, all that roaring, into her own splitting-

apart parts: "Each morning I open
my eyes, I curse God," he said. Eternal
note. Sadness. "Let me die." Slow tremulous

cadence. *Cold*. The hospital room. The heart.
Stopped. Those seven seconds. Gone. The coming
back. The kidney failure. The cancer. The cancer.

The gallstones. The staff—"Thy rod and Thy
staff"—infection. Cancer. Oh, God. It's cancer.
Sharp. The yellowed toenails. The calloused skin.

The poet's hands rubbing blood back
into his feet. *Ungiving*. The light-post
he drove into, backed away from, slammed

into. Again. Again. *Ungiving*. The steering
wheel. The dash. *Sharp*. The heartbreak.
The poet penning her banner "Welcome Home!"

on the world's naked shingles. The poet.
Again. Beside him. In the back. The last
pew. Neither invited to the ceremony. His IV

blocking the darkling plain. His daughter
in white, walking. Alone. *Cold*. “Ah, love,
let us be true,” the poet wrote. “The heart is

small. The heart that lives. All air, all fluff,
all soft-bend blown out. Crisped frail. And white.
O’Keeffe white.” She wrote how the heart that lives

skips flesh-rot, proceeds straight to bleached
bone. She wrote, “The cliffs of New Mexico stand:
all is bleached bone ground to sand. There is the wind,

the walls, the hard blue sky, but no calm. The tide
has gone and with it the moon. There is no more light.”
She wrote and wrote because he’d been dying, dying long.

Eureka Downs: "It Makes You Cry"

People talk about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego like they were the only heroes, but they had God there inside the furnace with them and visible, didn't they? What about those outside, the witnesses, all those nameless women and children and old men, who had to stand helpless while four men burned?

They do not burn away, the bodies. Forty-head
dead in Lenexa. February 7, 2006. Ten times
your number in '91. No word yet on how or why.
There are things that just won't say.

Like how you

knew before the call, some primal cell-knowledge
reacting to dawn at 3 a.m. in the west.

The house on the hill.

The barn below, past the pond. Flames already through
its roof when Mother's screams clawed their way
into your walls and into your ears,

into your sheets.

She called for her sons, and panic became the oxygen
that fed all her keening.

Metal bars and bins

melted cement floors, and yet they did not burn
away.

How tenderly Mother had polished

their nameplates, how you had stocked all the bins
with grain, stacked the aisles with hay, hung the leather,
newly-oiled, next to saddles and spurs and Allen and
Gray and Holly and the-one-not-yet-named.

How you moved

woodenly in the silence of her grief from bed to window
washed gold and out into the roaring, knowing you'd lost
more than these.

And Mother on her knees in crushed

white rock, her sons holding her head to their narrow
boys' chests, and Stepfather, standing back,
back—the backs do not break, the spines do not
burn, the vertebrae lead the eye, if it will follow,
as feet follow stones, up, under the heaps of ash,
and you know they tried to bury their eyes.

The mind flickers,
rewinds a silver screen where you saw a movie once,
Black Beauty or *Black Stallion*—it doesn't matter,
though you want to get it right: the horse
would not be saved.

It reared and whirled,
snorted and pawed.

It screamed,
until someone came to cover its eyes, and yet
you, you cannot turn, you cannot back away.

You stand, twelve years old, and the fire builds
each time you close your eyes.

And the movies,
the papers, they never say that it smelled sweet,
that it smelled safe, like home, like family, like
Sunday-after-church barbecues.

And at twenty,
you still cannot walk through fire.

At thirty,
you stand still in your dream, riveted to flame,
and there is no one to cover your eyes.

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Endnotes

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